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CONSULTANTS AND ORGANIZATION CONCEPTS; TRACING ROUTES OF RECEPTION

Stefan Heusinkveld & Jos Benders^{*}

**SOM-theme G
Cross-contextual comparison of institutions and organizations**

ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to explore how organization concepts evolve within consulting organizations. These companies are characterized by specific historical backgrounds, organization forms, particular services and include consultants with their own professional interests and competencies. As a consequence, organization concepts will likely take different journeys in different consulting companies and may leave a wide array of different traces. Drawing on interviews with leading consultants from a large variety of different consulting firms, this study seeks to develop several central elements in the internal reception trajectories. Firstly, the empirical material suggests a large range of alternative routes in the way organization concepts condense and crystallize consulting organizations. Secondly, the research found that the continuous processes of sedimentation and erosion of organizational knowledge that such concepts may bring along within consultancies suggests a more multifaceted view on stability and change than often is asserted by management fashion literature.

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INTRODUCTION

Recently, a consultant commented on the dissemination of organization concepts within consulting organizations: “It is very hard to catch and difficult to study because you often don’t know the direction of the causality and sometimes it is just a matter of induction. When a stream flows in one project other people may be watching it and at the same time a colloquium may be held on a similar issue. Before you know it they may recognize certain ideas and apply it the next week in their own projects. This world just works that way.” [O#1] An organization concept can be considered as a more or less coherent set of prescriptives and directives on organizing that is known by a particular label. Historical accounts demonstrated that such organization concepts have always played an important role in the way consultants have legitimized their profession and created their business. Various Scientific Management techniques like the Bedaux system of work measurement became an important determinant for thriving the expansion of early consulting organizations (Guillén, 1994; Shenhav, 1999). Moreover, the creation of allegedly new concepts has advanced the increase of American consulting firms and the subsequent widespread diffusion of management knowledge during the mid twentieth century (Guillén, 1994; McKenna, 1997; Kipping, 1999; Kipping, 2002). A firm like McKinsey extensively encouraged the dissemination of the Multidivisional Model and Boston Consulting Group became widely renowned for its Portfolio Matrix. The prevalence of their concepts on the market for management knowledge enabled these consultant firms to establish their presence within different countries and build on their status as well as their client relationships (Kipping, 1999). Recent examples show that organization concepts are still highly intertwined with management consultants’ discourse and practices. O’Shea & Madigan (1997) found, for example, that a firm like Gemini has extensively propagate their concept of Business Transformation during the 1990s and generate considerable revenues from its sales.

Ironically, however, too much dependence on one of these organization concepts ultimately proved not to be a viable route for consultants (Kipping, 1999). On the one hand popular concepts may easily be imitated since these are often widely

disseminated and hold a certain interpretative space that enables them to be applied in a large variety of different ways (Benders & van Veen, 2001). On the other hand the reception of these concepts often shows a transitory character. Theorists of management fashion have considered management consultants as important suppliers and commodifiers of short-lived organizational knowledge that jump on whatever bandwagon that may come across. As a consequence, fad-consulting practices are easily regarded to result in transient patterns in the attention for particular management knowledge and become extensively criticized for not necessarily producing the widely propagated results (O'Shea & Madigan, 1997).

In this paper we seek to understand the ambiguous role of organization concepts within consulting praxis and consider the way these concepts are received within consulting organizations. We argue that current accounts on management fashion offer merely a partial view on how consultants construct organization concepts because the way organization concepts are received *within* different consultant firms is often neglected. Specifically, in most instances theorists solely concentrated on the way consultants have advocated popular concepts on public display. Here consultants are merely depicted as a homogeneous group of keen professionals who pragmatically advocate and use these popular concepts in order to enhance their business. As a consequence, this picture easily leads one to disregard consultants also as *receivers* and fail to understand the multifaceted nature of the reception trajectories within different consulting companies.

This study empirically examines consultant organizations and the specific characteristics of their reception processes of the concept BPR. By drawing on in-depth interviews with leading management consultants from a variety of different consulting organizations, consulting reports and publications we sought to trace the way this organization concept condensed and crystallized within consulting companies. Unlike current impressions (cf. Abrahamson, 1996; Kieser, 1997), this paper argues that the development of organization concepts takes different journeys within different consulting companies and in this process transience and longevity co-exists. Firstly, the empirical material suggests that present understanding of the reception of concepts in consulting organizations is often one-sided because they mainly concen-

trate on external promotional efforts. Consequently, the alleged convergence in the way consultants deal with popular concepts is merely superficial. The condensation and crystallization of a concept may show major differences between distinct consulting firms. Moreover, in some cases introducing organization concepts in consulting organizations became a major and seriously contested effort. Secondly, it is questionable whether consultancy praxis is as transitory as many bell-shaped curves would suggest. Instead, various processes of sedimentation and erosion co-exist in various stages of the reception process of organization concepts in different consulting organizations.

UNDERSTANDING CONSULTANTS AND ORGANIZATION CONCEPTS

Merchants of management knowledge and forgetfulness

Consultants are regarded as an important part of the supply side of fashionable concepts. The increase of the consultancy industry is reflected in its expanded influence in the dissemination and legitimization of management knowledge (Faust, 1999; Clark & Fincham, 2002). However, consultants have to participate in the production and propagation of management knowledge to create a market for management solution and sell their largely intangible services. Establishing relationships with client organizations and developing a reputation as knowledge provider may hold an important source of competitive advantage (Kaas & Schade, 1995). Abrahamson (1996) hypothesized that these suppliers constantly seek to sense embryonic needs while at the same time shape this demand by communicating appealing ideas that may possibly fit or define perceived performance gaps. Theorists of management fashion often considered the creation of consulting concepts as merely fabricating an amalgam of relatively new ideas and re-polish older techniques that were forgotten and out of public sight. Ironically, however, while acknowledging the importance of these supply side processes in the emergence of potentially influential concepts, little is known about the way consultant organizations actually create, select and process incipient popular organization concepts. Instead, theorists have often concentrated on dissemination processes and the way organization concepts are constructed on public display

as well as how these are exploited to shape managerial discourse and practices in client organizations. Hence, these accounts have made only minor efforts to understand the highly ambiguous role of allegedly transient organization concepts in consulting praxis and the way these are enacted over time.

Recent studies on management consultants provided a more nuanced view on the way these actors shape organization concepts. These accounts often stressed the importance of organization concepts within different forms of the consultant client interaction. Here it is demonstrated concepts may enable to shape the consultant-client interaction both on a trans-organizational level and an interpersonal level. Firstly, it is shown that consultants continuously seek to define the shape of managerial discourse to propagate certain concepts and herewith strengthen their position on the market for business solutions (Furusten, 1995). Though consultants may often seek to hitch-hike on a hype in order to enhance their business, Benders, van den Berg & van Bijsterveld (1998) found substantial variety in the way consultants deal with popular concepts. Here, they often espouse their specific recipes on public display and competencies by ‘grafting’ them on contemporary popular ideas while at the same time draw upon them rather pragmatically in organizational change projects. Secondly, while acting in an atmosphere of mutual uncertainty, the inherent interpretative space of a concept creates an opportunity to build up a wide range of interpersonal relationships with client organizations (Clark & Salaman, 1996; Sturdy, 1997; Fincham, 1999). Here concepts may allow framing different organizational problems and make them recognizable to the client organization. On the one hand a concept may be applicable within different client situations and at the same time enhance the collaboration of different parties in a change process. On the other hand these concepts may create a common framework on a company level while at the same time offering a possibility for creative application of different techniques and perspectives by individual consultants (Werr, Stjernberg & Docherty, 1997; Werr, 1999; Fincham & Evans, 1999; Berglund & Werr, 2000).

However, the perception of a concept’s usefulness for consultants in the market for management knowledge appears to be time-specific. Once fashionable concepts tend to follow short-lived patterns of popularity and are often denoted as transitory

phenomena (Gill & Whittle, 1993). After a period of excitement and high enthusiasm, a concept becomes heavily criticized and loses its image of a rational and progressive idea to be replaced by another appealing vision. In addition, management fashion literature suggests that the short-lived pattern of discourse parallels the way these ideas are actually used in different organizations (Abrahamson & Fairchild, 1999). As a result, strictly maintaining a specific concept that is suffering from a collapse in interest will likely be detrimental to consulting praxis. For instance, McKinsey's reputation on the implementation of the Multidivisional Model in the 1960s produced serious problems in the long-run for this consulting firm when large business organizations no longer considered this model useful and as a consequence demand dropped significantly by the early 1970s (McKenna, 1997). On the demand side, the need for "new" concepts is not only fuelled by the downturn of a previous one, but also for an important part determined by *organizational forgetfulness* (Brunsson & Olsen 1997). Forgetfulness allows consultants to continuously re-polish old knowledge and present it as new. Staute (1996:144) even suggests that "Consultants are continuously engaged in rejecting what their colleagues recommended only a few years ago". Hereby the 'new' element is often regarded as solely the vocabulary under which conventional approaches become assembled. As a consequence, supply of organizational forgetfulness and at the same time adhering to state of the art rhetoric will be one of the main issues in consulting since it may induce demand for allegedly new and supposedly progressive concepts. These patterns easily lead one to see consultants as highly pragmatic merchants of both management knowledge and forgetfulness, constantly abandoning organization concepts in favor of new ideas in the hope of rapidly making business out of the issues of the day. These practices may provide little opportunities that increase the likelihood for consulting organizations of sedimentation and entrenchment of ideas and experiences.

Internal reception trajectories

In the previous section we saw that consultants have often been regarded as leading suppliers of allegedly new organization concepts by providing both management knowledge and organizational forgetfulness. As a result, these consultants increas-

ingly hold a considerable influence on the market for management solutions. However, present accounts on management fashion do not provide a satisfactory understanding of the reception of organization concepts by management consultant organizations themselves. Instead, since these accounts often concentrate on consultancy behavior on the knowledge market, little is known about how consulting organizations shape the reception processes of fashionable concepts *internally*. Hence, we argue that to fully understand this supply side of concepts, we have to take consultants also as *receivers* of organization concepts and consider the way these concepts are constructed and enacted within consulting organizations.

On first sight, such internal reception processes are not particular unexplored terrain. In the seminal work on innovation diffusion, Rogers (1995:391) seeks to frame the process of innovation adoption within organizations and identified several distinct stages. In early instance this process is characterized by stages of agenda setting and matching the innovation to particular organizational problems leading to a decision to adopt an innovation. This decision to adopt an innovation indicates the completion of an initiation stage and the beginning of an implementation process. In this implementation phase, the innovation is imported from outside, adapted to the specific organization and then put to use. In a final stage, the innovation becomes absorbed into the organizational practices and herewith loses its distinctiveness, which completes the innovation process.

However, while this model may be useful to explain the process of innovation adoption within user-organizations, it is not directly applicable in framing the reception of organization concepts in consultancies. Firstly, unlike the particular innovations Rogers refers to, organization concepts do not have a material component (Benders & van Veen, 2001). Instead, organization concepts provide a more or less coherent set of prescriptions and directives on organizing and are often known by a specific label. A vital aspect for a concept to ‘flow’ (Røvik, 1998) proves to be its ambiguity, or, as Ortmann (1995) and Benders & van Veen (2001) denoted, interpretative viability. The lack of a material component and the inherent interpretative space allows a concept to become *translated* in different ways. As a consequence, the process of translation results in different elements to become associated with a concept.

Obviously this is significantly at odds with regarding an innovation as a stable entity in the adoption and will have significant implications for the internal reception process in organizations. Secondly, consultancies are not typical user-organizations. As we saw in this paper, consultants are often regarded as important actors on the supply side of organization concepts. In these supplier-organizations, concepts are not only seen as means to enhance organizational performance, but consultants particularly consider such concepts as a product that can be sold to user-organizations. Consultancies are not primarily interested in applying concepts in their own organizations but are mainly focused on exploiting such concepts to sell their services to potential user-organizations and hereby generate business. Hence, the specific *focus* of consultancies with regard to organization concepts will likely take shape in a different internal reception process than user-organizations may encounter. Thirdly, in a previous section we already saw that many concepts have followed a typical pattern in which a phase of enthusiasm and large expectations was quickly replaced by a phase of disillusionment. When an organization concept loses its image of rationality and suffers from a collapse of interest in the market, consultancies likely feel urged to reject such a concept and replace it by another appealing idea. Particularly, while Rogers (1995) suggest that innovations go through a process of routinization, such recurring short-lived patterns make it at least doubtful that concepts may eventually become completely absorbed within consultancies.

These elements have significant implications for the character of the stages in the reception process. Reception may commence when a concept *condenses* in a consulting organization. Hence, the term adoption does not fully explain the way a concept may emerge in a consulting firm because a concept's rudiments may have a large variety of alternative sources that are constantly configured in different ways. Therefore we prefer to develop the notion of condensation to understand the way consultants or consultant organizations encountered a concept or elements associated with it. As Brunsson (1997) has argued, concepts or ideas associated with it need not solely be diffused. Instead, the reception of a concept is a specific configuration of importation and cropping-up processes that may be shaped by the specific context in which it emerges. Condensation will therefore involve the presence of certain rudiments and a

process of recognition in which these elements are identified as part of a coherent entity. At the same recognition must be accompanied by the specific constellation of different stimuli within a consulting organization to further concentrate on a concept.

A subsequent stage in the reception of a concept can be considered a process of *crystallization*. Here a consulting organization has already encountered a concept or the rudiments associated with it, but it now seeks to construct and establish its own version. The construction process is shaped by a constellation of interrelated company specific determinants like client interactions, methodical knowledge as well as professional expertise and professional efforts. Due to its interpretative space, an organization concept allows for a flexible use that may result in different drafts in different spatial and temporal contexts. To become established in a consulting organization, a concept has to be marketed both externally and internally. In the latter, a concept may compete with other ideas for prominence that may cause considerable frictions within consulting organizations.

Finally, the reception process may encounter a process of *transition*. Management fashion theorists argue that discourse and practices associated with a concept will likely show a transitory pattern (Abrahamson & Fairchild, 1999). These accounts often stress that while a concept may condense and crystallize in an organization, different market forces will likely induce abandonment. At the same time, however, Zeitz, Mittal and McAuley (1999) account for the possibility that fads and entrenched practices co-exist. Various conditions may increase the likelihood for a concept to become embedded within organizational practices of consulting firms. For example, Marchington et al. (1993) demonstrated that within organizations, different periods have been characterized by the prevalence of different management techniques. Though at the same time, these techniques have not been abandoned, but rather have changed in character and prominence. Whereas certain techniques may show a decrease in significance as others are introduced, most of them may leave specific traces within an organization or its members (Røvik, 1996). So, an organization concept's reception becomes part of a continuous process of recognition, sedimentation and erosion of management knowledge.

METHODOLOGY

Research sites

To get an understanding of the way organization concepts are received within consulting organizations we concentrated on the way consultants and groups of consultants enacted the concept of BPR from the late 1980s onwards. Initially, we examined the way consultants constructed the concept on public display and examining which firms were involved in these dissemination practices. Ultimately, we found a sample of thirty-eight consultants from twenty-two different consulting firms willing to participate in this research. These firms vary significantly in origin, size and focus and thereby allow us to consider the way organization concept of BPR has evolved in different structured settings. The headquarters of these firms were located in The Netherlands (13), United States (7), United Kingdom (1) and France (1). Where possible, we invited multiple respondents for each consulting company in order to complement each other in obtaining a comprehensive view on the entire reception process. The main practice area of these informants cover a wide spectrum of different consulting including Transformation Management, IT Implementation, IT Strategy, Strategic Management, HRM, Healthcare Management, Financial Management and Industrial Consulting. Here we sought informants who were very closely involved in the introduction and development process of a concept while at the same time invited people who witnessed this process thoroughly from different formal positions. Because in a large number of cases consultants moved between various organizations, this implied to search beyond the consulting companies within which they were initially employed. Far most of these consultants, however, hold a relatively high level of seniority, which increases the likelihood of having a comprehensive longitudinal overview.

Data generation

We conducted semi-structured interviews that covered four broad key topics. These topics concentrated on, retrospectively, explaining how a concept condensed and crystallized in a consulting organization. Here, respondents were asked to describe the

way their consulting firm has encountered BPR or elements associated with it, the uptake process, their experiences in applying the concept and the envisioned future role of the concept in their consulting praxis. The way these topics were elaborated strongly depended on the consultant's experiences. The interviews were conducted on the research sites and lasted on average 90 minutes ranging from 60 minutes to over 120 minutes. These interviews were recorded on mini-disc and subsequently transcribed together with the elaborate notes taken during the interviews. The consultant respondents were able to check the transcriptions made of the interviews. We followed an inductive approach and analyzed the way a concept has evolved in different consulting organizations by continuous comparison of the interview data. Within this process, the reception framework, as been introduced in the previous section, supported to construct and elaborate a grounded model on the way organization concepts may condense and crystallize in consulting firms.

TRACING RECEPTION TRAJECTORIES IN CONSULTING FIRMS

In the reception model developed below we seek to frame the specific nature of the reception processes within consulting organizations. In this model, reception of organization concepts is understood from an evolutionary perspective as a continuous process of managerial discourse and organizational actions associated and induced by this discourse (Benders & van Veen, 2001; Brunsson, 1997; Zbaracki, 1998). In the next sections we will frame several central elements in the reception of organization concepts in consulting organizations by elaborating and developing an understanding of processes of condensation, crystallization and transition (Figure 1).

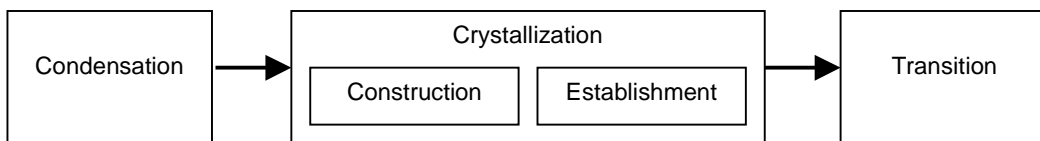


Figure 1: Central elements of reception in consulting organizations

Condensation

The emergence of an organization concept in a consultancy is not just a matter of formal adopting a fixed object from outside (cf. Rogers, 1995). Instead, whether a concept condenses in a consultancy is a continuous process that is shaped by the presence and nature of several interrelated elements. Here we distinguish between (1) sources and rudiments, (2) the processes of recognition and (3) triggers that may enhance these processes (Figure 2).

Generally, several central rudiments must be encountered which do not only come from external sources but also emerge for a significant part from sources internal to the consulting firm. These rudiments must be recognized and associated with an organization concept. Whether these elements are regarded as new is largely dependent on the present practices and experiences within a consultancy. The process of recognition involves linking particular organizational problems to specific solutions as well as the identification of business opportunities to exploit this linkage. At the same time triggers must be present that actually urges a consultancy to be receptive to new opportunities and making effort in recognizing these opportunities.

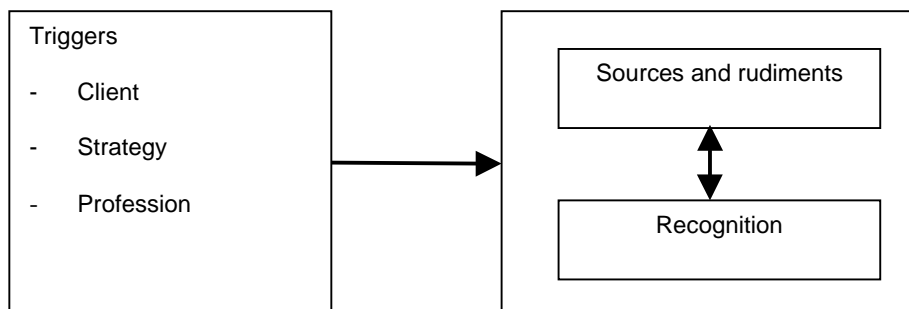


Figure 2: Condensation of organization concepts in consultancies.

Sources and rudiments

Firstly, we argue that it is a constellation of different *sources* that cause a consultant to encounter some *rudiments* of an organization concept or ideas associated with it. While explicit client demand for a certain concept may be regarded as the most essential source, empirical evidence on the way consultant organizations encountered

BPR pointed out that this is merely one element in the multifaceted constellation of different sources and rudiments that may fuel recognition of a concept. Next to explicit demand for a certain concept, consultants may also be confronted with more implicit persistent problems and recurring client demands on certain issues. These chronic problems induced different actors to combine efforts in their search for solutions. In some cases this has led to the creation of networks of consultant specialists. In other cases consultants came in touch with colleagues that were employed in different universities, consulting firms and client organizations. There were even several cases in which the entrance of an individual consultant significantly fed the knowledge on the concept of BPR within a consulting firm. Additionally, even the supply side may be a source for ideas. Managerial discourse in print media some consulting firms felt urged to work out a certain label that became a buzzword. Moreover, managerial discourse on an allegedly new issue may encourage consultants to distillate the elements that are valuable for their own understanding of organizations.

However, not only sources *external* to the consulting company may feed the condensation process but *internal elements* also play an important part. In the case of BPR we saw that internal courses to consultants, the structured exchange of project experiences and the participation in specific organizational change projects may act as a source of inspiration for many consultants. Also the specific consulting firm professional orientation and existing tools and approaches have been considered as important rudiments for the construction of an organization concept like BPR. A significant part of the ideas associated with a concept has its origin in indirect sources like a consultant's formal education, their project experiences and professional occupations. For instance, in their formal education many BPR consultants were confronted with considering organizations from a process point of view or became as an engineer familiar with designing from a white sheet of paper or directing large groups of different actors in a construction process.

Recognition

Secondly, the presence of different external and internal sources is not enough for an organization concept to condense since a consultant or consultancy must in a certain

way *recognize* a concept. This is to say that a certain group of elements are identified as being part of a relatively coherent organization concept at a certain moment. Exemplary for the situations that a consulting firm may have noticed a concept, but did not identify it as an important issue is the following statement: “We had already heard of BPR, but did not really know what it was, so within our firm it was not yet an appealing term.” [V#1] Later on, this consulting firm performed a substantial amount of BPR projects and extensively propagated that concept on public display. Another consultant asserted that: “In spite of the fact that I read the literature on BPR I have not consciously thought about it until very recently.” [U#3] Some insights associated with a concept may remain often latent for some time and are afterwards considered as BPR *avant la lettre*. In many cases a specific moment of adoption does not exist, but recognition of a concept consists of several instances and events to be combined. As one consultant remarked: “It appeared that at a certain moment all floodgates were suddenly opened and everywhere you heard about the concept: in the corridors of our consulting firm, in the professional literature, at our clients and in the mailings.” [V#2]

Sometimes these events may not directly lead to the widespread identification of a concept. Illustrative for this is the case within which several consultants followed some courses in the late 1980s on redesigning business processes in the US while their senior partners considered it too highbrow and quickly put it aside. However, retrospectively these seniors: “...admitted this was a strategic failure because the knowledge we took with us they should have recognized as a peep into the future that, as a consulting firm, one should immediately grasp and seek to advance.” [P#2] Also several projects were not directly linked to BPR and caused a consulting firm to lose the assignment by offers from competing firms that charged significantly higher fees which was often associated with the promises of BPR for considerable improvements. Therefore, it is not solely managerial discourse or client demand that urged a consulting firm to identify a concept. Instead, many cases proved that elements like recurring problems, publications, specific approaches, professional occupations and case experiences have to come together at a certain point in time and space to recognize a concept within a consulting organization.

The extent to which a concept is recognized as *new* to consultants is context dependent. Since novelty is often considered a deviance from the present situation (Ortmann, 1995:395), one has to understand the specific context in which an allegedly new concept is recognized. For some consultants the concept of BPR was in fact completely new and elements like the process orientation regarded as an eye-opener. One Information Planning consultant, formerly trained in methods of functional decomposition stated that: "... personally it was a significantly different approach and point of view that I had before". [V#1] Others regarded the concept as merely common consulting practice and BPR as a new term for largely a reformulation or re-grouping of both existing methods and experiences. "In BPR, only the scope within which certain tools and techniques were applied was slightly different." [P#1]

In many cases, however, consultants stated that the concept introduced several new elements in their consulting practice. One novel element was regarded the radicality with which organizational changes were announced by consultants to client organizations: "The radical and integral approach as well as stating loudly as a consultant that you are actually going to do it in this way is a novel element." [O#2] In other consulting organizations the introduction of the concept into specific sectors like the financial sector or healthcare was considered new. For several IT focused consulting firms, accounting for the organizational changes within the introduction of IT in organizations was regarded as revolutionary while several, more industry sector focused consulting firms regarded the introduction of IT in their change projects as innovative. One informant stated that changing people and their mindset and focus on the cultural aspects of organizational design was identified as 'new'. However, as argued before, the perceived novelty of certain elements of a concept differs significantly between and within different consulting companies.

Triggers

Thirdly, purely opportunistic rationales do not explain why consulting companies, once they have identified a certain concept, actually will invest in this concept. Instead, the constellation of *triggers* that urges a consultant organization to understand a concept may come from a variety of different directions. Most obvious is that a con-

cept may provide an opportunity to come into contact with *clients* and to discuss their specific problems. The emergence of a 'new' concept may provide consultants with an entrance at a potential client to explain what it could mean. Here these instances offer an opportunity to expose their state of the art knowledge and competencies that may lead to assignments. "Managers came to you with the question: now you have to tell me all about BPR, it's new, I want to know all about it, and certainly don't want to miss it." [V#2]

However in the case of BPR, project assignments under this banner hold certain characteristics that significantly increased the concept's attractiveness to consultant firms. The specific rhetoric associated with BPR allowed consultants to offer large projects combined with ambitious goals that allowed charging large fees. At the same time these projects could be performed in a relatively standardized way and permits the involvement of many inexperienced low-cost consultants. Also BPR projects provided space for multiple service offerings on for instance strategic, operational and IT level. So, not only direct, but also indirectly the concept of BPR was expected to increase sales of consulting services that made it worth investing in.

Next to the project-related client trigger, one may identify the trigger of *strategic intent*. To invest in a concept like BPR was for some consulting firms a deliberate intent to move structurally into the big leagues, sell their services on a high level to appealing clients and compete with the traditionally up-market consultant firms. Other, more IT related consulting firms often considered organizational knowledge associated with the concept as a strategic knowledge area. Within several of these consulting firms, ideas associated with BPR are increasingly considered as an essential asset within their knowledge base. One manager at an IT consulting firm even argued that: "BPR has become an integral aspect of all our services." [M#2] In one case, introducing BPR was regarded as an effort to change the relatively soft image of the predominantly people oriented consulting firm into a more structural design profile. Here advancing the development of BPR was a way to improve their competencies on organizational design and to define the shape of the company's profile in this area. The presence of these strategic intentions has often led to significant support from a central level to further development of a concept.

A final trigger for adopting a concept lies in the *professional* sphere. Here concepts should fit a consultant's or consulting organization's professional interest and professional frame to be appreciated. "The concept perfectly matched the mainstream of [P], so it became a logical step as a consultant employed here" [P#3]. In other instances it was the intrinsic drive of individual consultants with a professional interest in organizational design: "If a number of people would not have been employed at [U], nothing would have happened here with BPR." [T#1] In some cases the emergence of BPR coincided with the search for identity as a starting consultant that had not been able to build up any reputation, or network of semi-permanent client relationships until then. Also, the specific characteristics attributed to BPR made the concept to become appealing for individual consultants. As one consultant noticed: "BPR was a fantastic sport for consultants" [O#2] The concept provided opportunities in business companies for consultants to look company-wide for performance improvements and was perceived as a creative process as well. As a consequence, "a number of consultants considered it as rather sexy to perform BPR assignments." [V#2]

So, while a concept may be commercially attractive, if it does not fit with the professional interests of individual consultants, the specific focus of a consultant company, or the specific demand of their network of clients, it may not be advanced by a consulting firm or may even not condense at all. These considerations have also encouraged consulting organizations deliberately not to invest in a concept. Since a concept like BPR is often associated with implementation, IT and workplaces, it did not become an issue for some strategy oriented consulting houses. Also, in case the sources or certain structural conditions are not strong enough, a concept may not fully condense into a consulting organization. One IT consulting firm perceived BPR a too large adjacent area that required certain consulting competencies they did not have at that moment. In one other case a consulting firm noticed the concept in the elaborate managerial discourse, but at the same time realized that it was no burning issue within their network of largely governmental clients which resulted in minor investments in a concept like BPR. Here both consulting firms knew the concept of BPR from mana-

gerial discourse and professional education, but the concept did not encounter strong bases that caused a concept to condense.

Construction

The *development* of a concept like BPR may take shape in a large variety of different ways. Here one may distinguish between (1) client-related, (2) method-related and (3) professional-related development efforts (Figure 3).

In general, consulting projects themselves are regarded the most common approach in *client related development* efforts. Consultants may seek to approach client problems by developing concepts that fit the problem situation. In these situations, case experiences generated from certain projects are gathered and evaluated. Several elements of these experiences may be documented and used in following consulting assignments. Some consulting firms were confronted with early demand for BPR from large clients. The construction of an elaborate project proposal urged them to write down some kind of a systematical approach. These initial projects often provided an opportunity to learn together with the client and embody the lessons into standardized methods and presentations. As the following quote indicates, initial experiences may significantly define the construction of a concept in a consultancy: “The things we have worked out in our first project remained similar for at least eighty percent until today.” [V#1]

Other consulting companies actively sought to develop organization concepts like BPR by continuously encouraging the organization of multi-client studies or partnerships. These studies were regarded as a proactive way to understand and shape the current market needs and to learn as a consulting firm. Here consultants carefully chose certain themes from their clients and subsequently by exploration further develop and extend these themes together with several early adopters of a new way of thinking. Initially, the BPR concept-in-development consisted of little tools and was not yet crystallized as a method or it was not even labeled BPR. To illustrate the enhancement of the BPR concept one consultant stated that: “In the beginning we arrived at our client with just a number of vague pictures and subsequently we learned a great deal. At that moment our firm found a number of early adopters of a new way of

thinking, but to the extent that it becomes more commoditized and is also picked up by other agencies, one has to be better documented and have to build up an advanced experience record.” [P#1] In a less in-depth variant of these multi-client studies consulting firms concentrated on arranging and facilitating client meetings in afternoon workshops. Within these workshops different clients are assembled and invited to discuss their problems and experiences on certain topics while the consulting organization might bring in their professional expertise and allegedly state of the art knowledge.

So, consultants may be both active and reactive in their development efforts. One group of consultant firms actively sought to sense client problems and shape solutions into recognizable concepts. In the case of BPR, several consulting firms have sought to create a market for the concept while there was not yet an autonomous demand for it. Another cluster of consulting organizations showed a more reactive attitude within which they were mainly guided by managerial discourse on an organizational and trans-organizational level. In several cases, after the emergence of discourse on BPR, consulting firms have: “...automatically received client questions on BPR, and at that moment we seek to take advantage of that need.” [C#1]

Method related development efforts have concentrated on the grouping and coupling of knowledge into a concrete professional approach. Here several consulting firms have established a semi-permanent natural working team obtaining best practices and define a coherent framework on BPR related themes that is able to encompass different goodies in a systematic way. These practices are not extensively developed from scratch, but by means of a project group, different tools and techniques are derived from the consulting organization or from other firms that have been annexed.

A broader and more in-depth variant of these working teams is the formation of research consortia to develop separate elements of a concept. These consortia were established by the cooperation of different consulting firms, business organizations, universities and different widely known management gurus that sought to create a market for BPR while at the same time constructed methods and obtained experiences within client organizations. Here the construction of the BPR concept induced a considerable amount of applied research that was considered advantageous for both con-

sultants and their clients as well as associated universities and management gurus. The different supplying actors were able to benefit from their different competencies in the development and marketing of the approach. On a smaller scale, various individual consultants have obtained budgets and a certain amount of time to develop a structured approach on BPR or aspects of it. By demonstrating certain prospects for commercial success, consultants have claimed resources from their management to further develop BPR-related approaches. So these efforts to develop a certain method may originate both from a central or decentralized level.

Professional development networks concentrated on the individual consultants and their exchange of experiences and construction of some persistent problems or contemporary management issues. Within consulting organizations there are often organic processes that drive professional specialists to coalesce around persistent problems or solutions. As one consultant noticed: “Often when a new concept is introduced, a new group of people will emerge around it.” [P#3] The introduction of BPR has increased recognition of the professional expertise of certain consultants and linked to several problems. As a consequence, in several consultant companies the concept has induced: “... internal discussions on BPR and an exchange of methods to each other by working on projects cooperatively.” [T#1] These professional networks may then define clusters of problem solving methods and discuss their individual experiences.

Within these development efforts, concepts are not always translated in the same way. Instead, most consulting firms constructed BPR from their own experiences and competencies, leading to entirely different understandings of BPR. Some consultant organization had constructed a strategic approach on BPR within which consultants took a company wide view and on a high abstraction level business processes were redesigned. At the same time, however, many IT consulting companies defined BPR on a more operational level and coupled the concept to information system development projects. Though there were different “versions” of BPR, consultants were not always familiar to these differences: “Only much later I became aware of the fact that there were also other, different, perceptions of BPR.” [P#2] Also the construction process may not even result into a relatively coherent or material con-

sulting product. In one case, a project group was created to develop the concept BPR, but this effort did not result in a specific output because consultants could not find agreement on the definition and shape of the concept. As one consultant noticed: “Eventually, BPR was buried silently while at the same time consultants used different aspects of BPR in their practices.” [B#1]

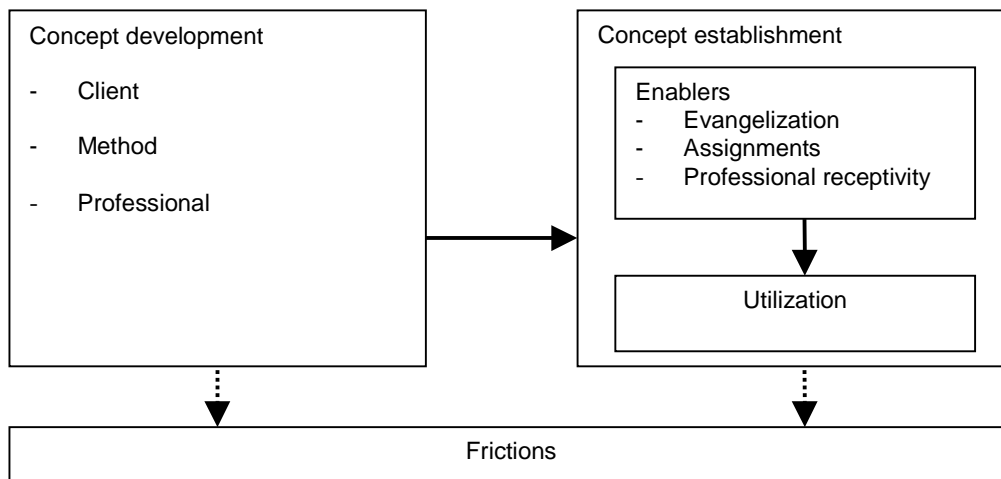


Figure 3: Crystallization of organization concepts in consultancies.

Establishment and Utilization

Once developed, a concept needs to become established in a consultancy. However, the establishment of a concept is not a straightforward matter. On the one hand it requires a considerable effort to create an enabling environment for a concept to become utilized and settle within a group of consultants, while on the other hand this process may be a base for frictions within a consulting firm (Figure 3).

Enablers

Firstly, consultants not only promoted BPR into the market in different ways, but also had to *roll out* the concept within their own organization and needed to find support from colleagues. However, as many cases demonstrate, it may take considerable effort to disseminate a concept through a consulting organization and to convince other

consultants of its value. Consultants often do not adhere to certain concepts automatically, but it took a considerable amount of *evangelization* and pushing to convince consultants that BPR was a 'new' way of thinking which has important business opportunities. Certain people have to believe in the concept, propagate this belief and seek to assemble a group of disciples around it. In many instances the presence of a 'soul of fire' (Stjernberg & Philips, 1993) or innovation champion (Rogers, 1995: 398) within a consulting firm is regarded a crucial factor for the establishment of a concept. "Often within a consulting organization a concept champion emerges and it depends on his formal position, his charisma, the extent this person is able to inspire other consultant and his commercial successes whether a concept may expand in a consultant firm." [K#3] Moreover, as some people obtained a certain status as concept champion, it allowed them to further the dissemination process in their consulting organization: "All through the organization I was regarded as Mr. BPR and this position enabled me to get certain things done." [P#2]

In addition, consultants produced flyers and manuals on BPR and organized workshops to acquaint people with a concept and to transfer the ideas associated with it. In some cases consultants designed an intranet environment to develop a concept into a living mechanism instead of disseminating just another static manual. However, formal training situations proved to be the most effective way of transferring a concept within a consulting company: "Our courses are the most important carrier of the method and are the most important way to disseminate the ideas." [F#2] Also, *commercial successes* are needed to increase the receptiveness of consultants: "Owing to the success of the method people become enthusiastic and it increasingly generates attention." [B#2]

Nevertheless, internal dissemination efforts of BPR were not always successful. In several instances BPR adherents were not able to widely disseminate the concept within their organizations. In one case, a BPR consultant situated his practice into a psychologist dominated consulting firm. In spite of his commercial successes and a sufficient quantity of assignments, his considerable dissemination efforts did not result in an expansion of the BPR practice within this consulting firm. This was on the one hand caused by the inability of the present group of consultants to under-

stand the concept which caused a significant barrier to further internal dissemination. On the other hand, because of the specific image of the consulting company, it became rather intricate to attract more disciples on this discipline from outside. The lack of *professional receptivity* resulted in the cancellation of several assignments because the BPR product champion was not able to provide enough staff to perform the projects. “From the start, the BPR practice went prosperously and I acquired many of those projects, but I had little colleagues that also were able to understand it.” [N#2] In other cases the introduction of the concept did not have the right *timing*. Several consulting firms have tried to enter the Healthcare sector with BPR. “Together with another consultant of [K], [...] has written a book on BPR in Health Care in the early 1990s, but this effort was not continued at that moment.” [K#4] Although this consultant made the translation and seriously published on this subject, it has not been picked up at that moment. In another firm, consultants who performed BPR assignments in the financial sector have tried to enthuse their Health Care consulting department in the mid 1990s. Yet, at that moment the consultants involved regarded BPR: “...not to be applicable in hospitals and not a product for the Health Care sector.” [V#1]

Frictions

Secondly, the emergence of an allegedly new concept like BPR in the early 1990s within a consultant organization is often not uncontested, but may cause serious *frictions* that may emerge from several situations. These frictions may appear from resistance in already established and *institutionalized consulting practices* within an organization. One case showed that a large group of traditional IT architects developed considerable objections to the establishment and crystallization of BPR within another unit of a large consulting firm. Here the organization concept was regarded as an approach to involve employees in the design process. However, the cluster of IT architects was convinced that these employees were obviously unable to understand organizational design problems because they had not enjoyed any formal education in this area and did not possess years of experiences like the IT consultants had. As a consequence, the leading consultant of the IT architects unit considered BPR and the

involvement of employees in organizational design associated with it "... to be detrimental to his professional occupation." [K#3] This disagreement resulted in serious opposition and critical articles in the internal magazine of the consulting firm. However, since the unit that exploited BPR managed to obtain a considerable amount of large projects in which large groups from the IT architects units were employed, these architects were forced to perform projects in the BPR way. Also because the group became commercial successful, this evoked certain respect within the entire consulting firm. Another example came from a consulting firm within which TQM and continuous improvement were regarded institutionalized practices. Here, it became not uncontroversial to do BPR assignments because large groups of consultants argued that this concept did not fit the present image of their consulting firm. Some leading consultants in this firm even: "... spoke with a certain disdain about the concept of BPR as well as the group of cowboys propagating it, and therefore we had to fight for our position in the consulting firm." [V#2] However, this opposition provided the group of BPR consultants with an opportunity to strongly dissociate oneself from the institutionalized consulting practices and urged them to clearly define and develop their own approach.

Another supply of frictions within a single consulting firm may come from the struggle of *different units* to monopolize the exploitation of an organization concept. These conflicts sometimes concentrate on the labeling of a concept. A consulting unit that mainly covered the high-end part of the consultancy market felt considerably threatened by a sister company that intended to gain a reputation on overlapping business by developing a concept associated with BPR. Ultimately, the intense political struggles resulted in the situation within which different labels were coupled to similar concepts. In other cases struggles emerged from the transfer of knowledge on BPR from one unit to another. The CEO of a large consulting firm noticed that a daughter company had considerable success with BPR, while within the parent company little was achieved under this label. As a consequence, it was decided that one leading consultant from the daughter company would enable the transfer of BPR knowledge to the parent. However, this consultant encountered considerable opposition because it was regarded as simply giving away valuable knowledge to another

group of consultants. In this case also efforts to roll out BPR in the large parent company as medium for an increased worldwide standardization caused internal dissensions and struggles. Because different, relatively autonomous units had invested in their own version of the concept and were therefor unwilling to simply abandon their approach, worldwide standardization encountered significant resistance.

Transition

Consulting practices associated with a certain concept do not follow a similar transient route like the general media discourse, but elements of a concept evolve in a large variety of different ways in different consulting contexts. To understand the way these elements of a concept evolve one should distinguish between (1) market oriented changes and responses and (2) professional related developments that both have an important effect on the (3) exploitation of internal knowledge (Figure 4).

In general, these consultancies have gained considerable experience over time by performing BPR projects and generated knowledge on this issue. However, after a period of large popularity the concept of BPR was confronted by a significant downturn in the market. In many cases, not only changes in general interest for the concept, but also the professional developments of individual consultants has considerably influenced consultancy efforts to further develop knowledge on this particular concept. These developments have led to different situations in which on the one hand elements sedimented and became entrenched in consulting practices while on the other hand consultancies experienced erosion of knowledge. Moreover, some rudiments formerly associated with BPR experienced a re-emergence in allegedly “new” concepts. At the same time, the viability of knowledge of a particular concept remained dependent upon the professional interest of consultants and the perceived usefulness in their particular assignments.

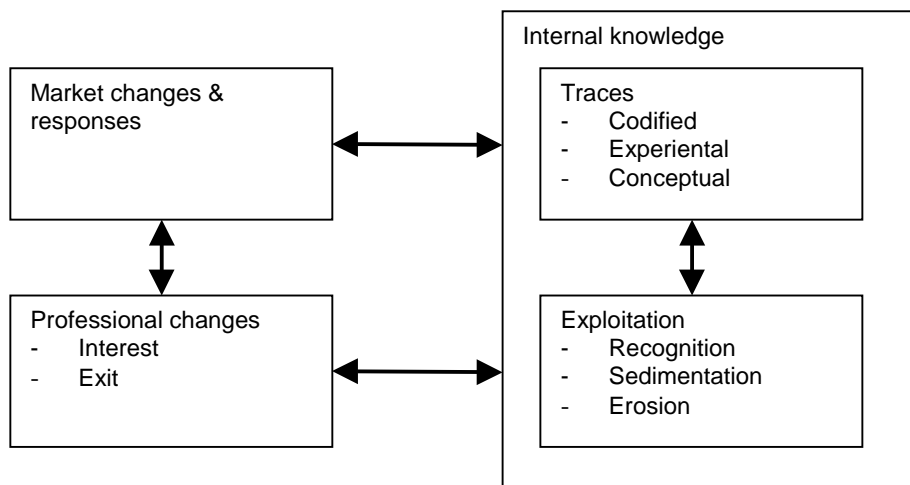


Figure 4: Transition of organization concepts in consultancies.

Market changes and responses

Firstly, *market changes* associated with a concept are caused by a constellation of various interrelated determinants. Also in The Netherlands on a general level managerial discourse on BPR witnessed a significant downturn from 1995 onwards (Heusinkveld & Benders, 2001). In the course of time, consultants experienced a process of closure (cf. Bijker, 1990) in which one particular connotation of the concept became prevalent within different contexts. The dominant understanding of BPR in the market became one of large scale and radical reorganizations. In some cases the concept turned out to be closely associated with failures and large-scale dismissals. However, while consultants acknowledge that several highly disappointing cases were inevitably present, these do not so quickly emerge in public domain because neither the client organization, nor the consulting firm, nor the professional management magazines involved have an interest in widely spreading unsuccessful practices. Also because of the major marketing efforts of consultants, the concept obtained a rather commercial character. "This means that everyone gets such a pile of junk on his desk with leaflets of all the new BPR congresses." [Q#1] Finally when a concept resonates for a while in a business community, it becomes regarded to be not at the forefront of management knowledge any more. This process has been reinforced by

the introduction of other popular concepts that drew the attention in the market for management knowledge.

At the same time reception processes often include a de-coupling of the rhetoric and substance of a concept. An account of one consultant may illustrate this: “The labelling and the content of consulting assignments are two entirely different worlds.” [T#1] This important characteristic of organization concepts allowed and induced consultants to develop a wide array of different responses to a waning interest of a certain organization concept. In case of a downturn, consultants will likely use a concept’s label less frequently in interaction with a client. Since a concept will in cause of time not be regarded as new anymore, consultants will likely speak in commodity terms about it. In the market, only a few terms became associated with BPR eventually, and the concept as a whole often still remains “... a point of reference to denote what kind of change process one is talking about.” [F#1] Also consulting firms often seek to dissociate themselves from the faddish concept by relabelling their services, the departments or even the name of their consulting company. However, exemplary for the notion that it is questionable whether the declining attention for a concept affect consulting practices is the comment of a consultant: “The term BPR is not used so often any more, but regarding the work we do on the subject of process improvements, process design and the design of new ventures, it is still exactly the same as five years ago.” [F#2] In one case a consultant firm considered that the dominant understanding of BPR did not so much fit the image of the consulting organization. This situation has caused to be one of the major arguments for the abandonment of the concept in consulting organizations and the exit of the consultants involved in BPR projects. Conversely, not in any case the label of the concept was abandoned by consultancies. One consulting firm deliberately maintained using a BPR associated label because it was considered a denotation of their profession and it did not generate any problems in their network of clients.

In other instances consultant firms sought to develop other markets within which the concept has not obtained a certain connotation yet. Within several large consulting organizations this has triggered the transfer of methods and experiences on BPR from one unit to another. When a branch group within a large consulting firm

acquired a large BPR assignment in 1999, but did not have any experience in it they absorbed all existing material on this concept within the consultancy and: "... involve people experienced in BPR to make a specific education program and educate our consultants for this project." [K#4] One smaller consulting firm that had generated a considerable amount of experiences on BPR projects saw that the concept became a major issue in a specific sector. However, they "...were not able to cultivate this market by themselves because they did not have the right networks and did not speak its language..." [U#3] Consequently, the directors of this firm have recruited a sector specialist as a senior consultant to advance their presence on this specific market.

Next to the development of new markets for a similar product, consulting firms also increased their efforts in the development and marketing of other leading concepts. Relative large consultancy organizations often hold a portfolio of different services and individual consultants can be employed at multiple project types. While the aggregate demand for consulting services will often remain on a certain level, the attention to different products may continuously fluctuate. If the tenor for a concept in the market becomes less favorable, it may affect consultant's promotional efforts in that area. In response of the changing management agenda and dominant language, consultant firms develop and adhere to other concepts that have become prevalent. So, while market related determinants may change the dominant rhetoric, the application of a concept's elements may continue and go along with other consultancy services. This may result in situations that customers: "... now ask for things as how to implement CRM within their call-center, however this still includes that you are going to do process analysis and redesign." [K#2] So, while clients may pose other questions, this will for a large part result in similar services and make an appeal to existing professional knowledge and experiences. Elements of BPR are still regarded as useful, only at a certain moment those elements are named differently in the market.

Internal knowledge

This brings us at another element in the transition stage. While loosely coupled to the market responses, the *internal knowledge* associated with the concept of BPR may

also take different routes. This loose coupling is reflected in the fact that in many cases large parts of the consultants' toolkit and basic philosophy have been fixed for a considerable time while the rhetoric to denote the constellation of certain ideas changes continuously. As one consultant argued: "Through the years, the techniques might change a bit, methods will certainly change and the organization concepts are just a reflection of the management themes that are prevalent at a certain moment." [P#1] Parallel to the loose coupling of labels and content, there is a continuous process of creation, sedimentation and breakdown of knowledge associated with an organization concept. As a consequence, the presence of the concept BPR in various consulting firms has left a wide array of different *traces*. As argued before, a concept like BPR has left a specific connotation in the market, especially at client organizations. Here we demonstrate that also within a consulting organization traces of a concept may exist both in a materialized or fluid form.

Firstly, a concept may leave behind several *codified traces* that, depending on the specific consulting firm, are recorded in a structured or rather uncoordinated way. In several instances, companies made considerable efforts to materialize and concretize knowledge on BPR. Here product managers and departments had a central role in the generation, codification and dissemination of knowledge associated with a concept as well as providing support in its application. These knowledge manifestations included presentations, case descriptions, methods, tools, tenders and internal articles and were stored into folders, CD's and intranet applications. In some IT related consulting firms, ideas and approaches developed under the label of BPR became embodied into the central methodology and internal courses. Others, however, have not so extensively entrenched and codified elements associated with a concept into manuals: "We were so busy that none of us took the time to further develop the method. At a new assignment we just combined the knowledge of previous projects." [U#2] Within these firms structurally little codified methods and manuals regarded to limit the creativity of the individual consultant. Therefore, knowledge generated from BPR projects became very strongly concentrated in the heads of a few individuals. The expertise is present but dispersed throughout these consulting company and apart from the conceptual ideas, little became embedded or connected.

Secondly, next to leaving several codified traces, a concept may also sediment different kinds of *fluid traces*. On the one hand *experiential sediments* are often strongly coupled to individuals and are very difficult to record or to pass on to others. When a BPR consultant founded his own consulting organization, he asserted that he took mainly the experiences with him and little manuals or methods because: "... at a certain moment everything is just in your head." [U#2] Therefore, though the availability of material traces like manuals may be considered useful, to succeed in doing consultancy assignments requires a lot more. One consultant stated that: "Consultants need to have a considerable amount of capabilities that go beyond the BPR concept..." [O#2] This is reinforced by the notion that knowledge absorption and usage is largely dependent on individuals: "The individual consultant learns most." [O#2] On an individual level consultants constantly accumulate project experiences on BPR because they are faced with things that do or do not work. Although these experiences may be discussed in group sessions, little of it will be systematically stored. Hence, in spite of the storage of different material traces on concepts, it may remain questionable whether it will be accessible in the sense that someone without any experience is able to use it instantly.

On the other hand, *conceptual sediments* are more abstract forms of knowledge that, as a kind of mindset, became increasingly entrenched in all kinds of consulting practices. While most consultants acknowledge that the attention for the specific concept of BPR will likely fade to the background, conceptual elements of BPR are not regarded as hype but in several instances increasingly showed entrenchment. The concept was able to stimulate focus on business processes and thinking 'out-of-the-box' and thereby influenced the mindset of many consultants. Also these notions have been diffused more extensively both in companies as well as in consultancy organizations. For some consulting organizations this concept became regarded a leap forward in management thinking: "BPR was certainly no fad but a breakthrough in thinking about advancing the efficiency within organizations and operations." [P#1] On a conceptual level BPR increased understanding on certain organization problems, and the concept was considered a way of thinking that is added to pile of knowledge. Also for large groups of consultants, BPR induced a shift in their way of consulting:

“Whereas previously consultants started from a present organizational situation and tried to improve that, BPR induced them to think about how it should be.” [P#2] For another group of consultant specialists, their traditional professional practice area became more recognizable and more diffused. Because of the dissemination of the concept, a number of subjects came on the managerial agenda, which made consultants able to name them and their clients willing to identify them.

Professional changes

Although these traces of BPR may be stored by consultancies in various degrees, the use of this knowledge is strongly related to the interests of individual professionals and their perceptions of the market opportunities of this knowledge. Hence, the *professional* related developments have markedly influence on the entrenchment of an organization concept. “Large consultant organizations have a considerable amount of their knowledge on their intranet, but it is not likely that it will be applied if people do not feel any enthusiasm about it.” [N#2] After a design team has done its job and defined a concept within a consulting organization, the intensity of use may differ significantly. In some cases professional *interests* and business opportunities has lead BPR associated concepts to become further developed and entrenched into consulting practices. Here a consultant observed that the concept: “...continued to be popular and will remain a vital competence that many of our consultants use on a daily basis and became a main part of our education program.” [F#2] When the concept was developed on a central level, it was pulled out from the central unit. People extensively apply the ideas in their projects that resulted in commercial successes and further dissemination. Also by wide application, the company obtained advanced experiences with it that may be entrenched on a personal level and recorded on an organizational level. In this way knowledge on a certain concept may stay alive, may grow and become re-used in new projects. Also in other cases BPR associated concepts turned out to be regarded as a professional art, became part of a common language and had a connecting function within consulting organizations. Here an organization concept is regarded as an idiom to make certain approaches transferable across different units and considered a recognizable professional skill.

In many other consulting firms, however, the professional judgements and actions of individual consultants have started a process of *erosion* of knowledge associated with an organization concept. On the longer run, consultants in several organizations did not see any future in doing BPR projects. Here the downturn of the concept in the market made consultants to reduce their efforts on the issue and made certain knowledge manifestations less appealing. In several instances central BPR offices were closed and knowledge storage became increasingly dependent on individual consultants. “Early this year I have thrown away large files of BPR examples. I am unable to pass it on to other people; I haven’t got time for it nor it appeals to young people who have recently entered our firm.” [O#1] The decrease in attention is also influenced by the professional development of consultants. As one consultant noticed: “... as one grows older and have seen more I increasingly want to do strategic projects instead of regarding business processes.” [T#1] In another case a BPR consultant at a large consulting firm established his own consulting company, but: “...I threw the entire BPR heritage overboard to start with a blank sheet of paper myself.” [P#3]

In large amount of cases the *exit* of consultants that were engaged in BPR had considerable consequences for the viability of a concept’s knowledge within a consultant organization. When these people become employed at other consulting organizations or business companies the ideas and experiences may increasingly become disseminated and applied in different situations. However, this has also caused significant problems in the accumulation and viability of knowledge. For example in a consulting firm one of the consultants who has done BPR projects suddenly had to brush up knowledge on process redesign within his organization because experienced people had all left the consulting firm. He stated that: “... last year there were several BPR assignments, but when I looked around me most people had never done such a trajectory, so I had to start from scratch.” [V#1] Here client problems and demands became important triggers for a revitalization and re-invention of certain knowledge manifestations. A similar situation appeared in another consulting firm within which the BPR initiators left the organization: “I had written the BPR approach but nobody at [N] remained that was able to apply it.” [N#2] In spite of several BPR demands from clients, this consulting firm became unable to acquire these kinds of projects. In

several other consulting firms the exit of key persons resulted in a decreased enthusiasm for the concept and a downturn in the application and the systematic generation of experience. So this makes that the sedimentation and recognition of knowledge becomes highly dependent upon the remaining employees. "At the moment, nobody considers it his task to upgrade the BPR folder, but the remaining people ensure that this knowledge will be transferred to the next cycle." [S#1] In addition, these "new" concepts may also urge consultants to accumulate new organizational or technical knowledge and skills while selectively using exiting approaches. Hence, although in many instances knowledge manifestations associated with a certain concept may be available in a codified form, it takes professional interest, conceptual understanding, experience, assignments and considerable investments to actually exploit it and render it viable.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This study concentrated on the way organization concepts condense and crystallize *within* consulting organizations. Specifically, we empirically traced the way the concept of BPR has developed within different consulting firms. Instead of solely viewing consultants as suppliers of management knowledge, this paper sought to understand consultant organizations also as *receivers* of organization concepts. Here we considered reception as an ongoing process that may generate discourse and organizational actions associated with it.

Recent studies showed that consultants obtained a large influence on managerial discourse on BPR (Heusinkveld & Benders, 2001). By extensively promoting the concept in print media publications, consultancies sought to create a market for the concept and espouse their recipes and competencies on this issue. A significant amount of consulting firms acknowledged that BPR associated practices thrived their business and generated considerable revenues during the 1990s. Towards the end of the 1990s, however, managerial discourse on this concept showed a significant decline. This may support the notion of many management fashion theorists to merely consider consultants as homogeneous group that opportunistically embrace temporar-

ily popular concepts to enhance their revenues. In addition, transitory intensity curves suggest that such concepts are not able to develop strong bases for entrenchment in consulting praxis. Though, by regarding the way this concept has developed *inside* different consultancies we found a more multifaceted picture that has several notable implications for our understanding of consultancies and organization concepts.

Firstly, the emergence and prevalence of an organization concept in a business community is not enough for such a concept to condense in a consultancy. Although there might often be important opportunistic reasons for adoption, consultants do not blindly adhere to any fashionable concept. Moreover, the emergence of a concept in a consultancy need not particularly be a matter of adoption in the sense of a stable entity being imported from outside (cf. Rogers, 1995: 394). Instead, we argue that an ongoing process of recognition is a central element in the process of condensation. This process of recognition must be fed by the presence of several sources and rudiments. The reception process can only commence when several ideas, forms of knowledge or experiences are already present, become partly imported and are built up in the consultant organization. These elements should allow for the possibility to become associated with a concept and considered as a solution to particular business problems. Whether a concept becomes actually exploited highly depends on the presence of several client related, strategic or professional triggers that urge a consultant or consultancy to consider a concept as something interesting in their particular consulting praxis. So while a concept may become popular, if does not fit with a consultant's professional interest, the strategic focus of a consultancy or the demands and language of their network of clients it is unlikely that a concept condenses in a consultancy.

Secondly, the development of a concept in a consultancy is not solely a matter of constructing a coherent approach (cf. Hatchuel & Weil, 1995; Werr, 1999). On the one hand, such an approach is developed in different ways leading to dispersed constellations of consulting knowledge to become associated with a concept. Here we identified several forms of concept development like client-oriented, method-related and professional efforts and saw how the concept became translated in different ways. On the other hand, for a concept to become viable within a consulting organization it

is not enough to be developed into a particular approach. Instead, consultants have to become interested in it and have to enact it on a wide scale. Therefore, a concept has to be extensively marketed internally to inform, train, and convince consultants of its business potential. So a concept will only become established when some ‘souls of fire’ (Stjernberg & Philips, 1993) are able to enthuse other consultants, achieve business and commercial successes, manage the knowledge associated with a concept and herewith attract a group of consultants with similar professional interest. Instead of being a straightforward process, both the development of a concept and efforts to establish it within the organization are often not uncontested. Particularly, the crystallization of a concept within a consultancy may cause serious frictions with institutionalized consulting practices as well as between different consultants or organizational units.

Thirdly, while in general consultants use these concepts rather eclectically and pragmatically in the market (Benders, van den Berg & van Bijsterveld, 1998), this study showed that the internal reception trajectories of organization concepts within consulting companies need not necessarily be similar. In this paper we sought to demonstrate how the concept of BPR followed different routes within different consultancies. For instance, one group of consultant firms actively sought to sense and shape specific problems and solutions and defined these in terms of an organization concept. In close collaboration with different gurus and media these consultancies extensively propagated the concept and tried to make a market for it. Others just passively followed the managerial discourse and client demand for the concept and, for a number of reasons, within some consultancies, a concept may not condense at all. Moreover, the efforts to advance the development of the concept became in several instances supported from a central unit while in some consultancies several individuals on a decentralized level mainly initiated the concept’s reception. Consultancies often translated the concept in such a way that it would fit their competencies, experiences and professional interests resulting in completely different views or approaches. As a result, the perceived novelty of a concept to a consultancy became dependent upon their particular contemporary skills and practices. Several organizations systematically codified their experiences into methods, tools and case descrip-

tions while other consultancies left the concept largely tacit because they were unable to find a common denominator or it was not common practice to extensively codify consulting knowledge. Within one cluster of consulting organizations we found significant erosion of knowledge associated with the concept because of the exit of several key persons and a decreased interest of the ones that stayed behind or the new staff. Others have partly re-labeled the ideas and integrated elements of BPR into different methods and service offerings. In a number of instances the concept remained viable because it continued to be applied in assignments, became entrenched in consulting practices or was regarded as a particular professional art.

Finally, whereas managerial discourse may witness a swing in the attention for a concept, we argue that consultancy ideas and practices do not develop in a similar way. Instead, this study showed a continuous process of recognition, sedimentation and erosion of knowledge associated with BPR. This suggests that neither the beginning nor the end of a concept is as abrupt as might be expected from a fashion (cf. Gill & Whittle, 1993; Abrahamson, 1996). In many cases, a multifaceted landscape of different rudiments was already present as remaining traces from the past. After a period of popularity, a concept often leaves a wide array of additional codified and experiential traces. Also, extensive discourse and organizational changes associated by it induced a further dissemination of a certain mindset across the population of consultants. However, the perceived market opportunities and professional interest largely determined whether these traces remained viable or faded to the background. Particularly, many consultancies experienced substantial erosion in the initial knowledge associated with a concept because a number of carriers left, remaining people felt little sympathy for the concept or other issues became prevalent. On the one hand the exit of consultants (cf. Alvesson, 2000) and prevalence of 'new' concepts caused consulting knowledge on BPR to erode. On the other hand, however, movements of people and the emergence of new concepts proved also to be an important element in advancing the transfer of management knowledge across different organizations, the selective application of existing knowledge and the generation of 'new' knowledge.

In this study we saw that particular consultancies increasingly collect and codify knowledge associated with an organization concept into large databases and intranet-applications. The emergence of such computer-based information technologies has induced debates on the perceived effectiveness of knowledge bases in consulting organizations (Morris & Empson, 1998; Olivera, 2000). However, as the consultant in the introduction section argued, most of a concept remained largely fluid, hard to catch and highly dependent on the particular interest of individuals. Moreover, as this pile of knowledge grows it becomes more and more difficult to acquire a well-informed overview and retrieval grows into a time-consuming matter. Therefore, though knowledge on a concept may be codified, without the professional and pragmatic interest of individual consultants it is not likely that it becomes viable. As Starbuck (1992) observed, the storage of knowledge in such firms only bring short-term preservation. In the long run, however, entrenchment requires that knowledge should be associated with temporarily problems and issues as well as actually be applied in daily practice. In addition we argue that the viability of a concept also involves preaching, convincing and enthuse people of certain references, norms and approaches. Hence, perceived market opportunities, personal interest in present-day issues and grouping of different people demonstrated to be a major incentive for recognizing and vitalizing codified traces as well as building experiences around an organization concept.

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